

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 812

CG 023 022

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TITLE Positive Adolescents Choices Training (PACT): Preliminary Findings of the Effects of a School-Based Violence Prevention Program for African American Adolescents.
SPONS AGENCY Ohio State Commission on Minority Health, Columbus.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (98th, Boston, MA, August 10-14, 1990).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Aggression; Behavior Modification; Behavior Problems; *Black Students; Cognitive Restructuring; *Interpersonal Competence; *Program Effectiveness; Secondary Education; *Skill Development; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS *African Americans; *Positive Adolescents Choices Training Program

ABSTRACT

The Positive Adolescents Choices Training (PACT) program is a culturally sensitive social skills training program developed specifically for African American youth to reduce their disproportionate risk for becoming victims or perpetrators of violence. The cognitive-behavioral group training approach equips students with specific social skills to use in situations of interpersonal conflict. The PACT program has been implemented with students between 12 and 15 years of age in cooperation with an urban school system. Participants were selected by teachers on the basis of skill deficiencies in relating to peers, behavior problems (particularly aggression), and/or history of victimization by violence. Twenty-eight students have completed the training and an additional 37 are currently being trained. The PACT project appears to be a viable and effective way to reduce the potential for violence in African American middle school youth. Students who completed the training were rated by both teachers and trainers as showing improvement in the target skill areas as measured by pre-to-post observation of behavior. Also, participants completing the program demonstrated reduced negative behavior such as suspensions or expulsions related to violent behavior in comparison to a closely matched group of untrained students. (Author/NB)

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POSITIVE ADOLESCENTS CHOICES TRAINING (PACT)

Preliminary Findings of the Effects of a School-based Violence Prevention Program for African American Adolescents



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Funding to support this project was provided by the Ohio Commission on Minority Health. This is a preliminary report. Please do not quote or distribute material from this document without permission of the author.

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ABSTRACT

The Positive Adolescents Choices Training (PACT) program is a culturally sensitive social skills training program developed specifically for African American youth to reduce their disproportionate risk for becoming victims or perpetrators of violence. The cognitive/behavioral group training approach equips youngsters with specific social skills to use in situations of interpersonal conflict. The PACT program has been implemented with youngsters between 12-15 years of age in cooperation with an urban school system. Participants are selected by teachers on the basis of skill deficiencies in relating to peers, behavior problems (particularly aggression), and/or history of victimization by violence. A total of 28 students have completed the training and an additional 37 are currently being trained. The PACT project appears to be a viable and effective way to reduce the potential for violence in African American middle school youth. Students who have completed the training have been rated by both teachers and trainers as showing improvement in the target skill areas as measured by pre-to-post observation of behavior. Also, participants completing the program have demonstrated reduced negative behavior such as suspensions or expulsions related to violent behavior in comparison to a closely matched group of untrained students.

Introduction

Positive Adolescents Choices Training (PACT) is a social skills training program for adolescents conducted by the School of Professional Psychology in cooperation with Dayton Public Schools. PACT was designed specifically to address the critical needs of African American youth to develop skills to reduce their disproportionate risk for becoming victims or perpetrators of violence.

PACT was initiated in 1989 as a 6-month pilot funded by the Ohio Commission on Minority Health. In the pilot, 13 African American youth aged 16-19 who were participants in an alternative school program for potential dropouts received social skills training. Some success was noted with these participants. By both teacher and youth trainer observation there was reduced negative behavior, improved positive behavior, and improvements in specific skills. However, overall the setting was determined to be problematic. Attendance at PACT training was dependent upon attendance at school. Since the parent program was targeted to chronically truant youth and offered neither leverage to force students to attend school nor strong incentives to maintain their voluntary attendance, absence was a major problem contributing to none of the participants completing the full cycle of training.

The pilot project also identified deficiencies in the curriculum. The format and content of the training approach was based on a commercial model called ASSET: A Social Skills Program for Adolescents (Hazel et al, 1981). This program offered some excellent features such as well-delineated behavioral components of 8 target social skills and an experiential emphasis making extensive use of videotape. However, it included some skills (conversation and following instructions) which were deemed less relevant to the prevention of violence. In addition, the accompanying videotape material was almost entirely lacking in minority role models and its scenarios were unrealistic in terms of the language, dress, and situations common to inner city youth. To remediate the curricular problems, the less relevant skills were dropped and new content was added from the violence prevention curriculum developed by Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith (1987), the former Commissioner of Public Health for the state of Massachusetts. In addition, project staff worked with a commercial videotape producer to develop new videotapes featuring African American youth demonstrating appropriate behavior in conflict situations.

In 1990, the project was relocated to Nettie Lee Roth Middle School where it was implemented with a group of 7th graders who were selected by teachers on the basis of criteria such as skill deficiencies in relating to peers, behavior problems (particularly aggression), or history of victimization by violence within the child's background.

Rationale for the Approach Selected

Adolescents experience violent crimes at extremely high rates. According to recent National Crime Survey data, among adolescents, 12-15 year olds comprise the age category most likely to be victimized by assault. Victims and offenders tend to be of the same age and the victim of this age is most likely to be attacked by a known assailant such as an acquaintance, peer, or youth gang (Rodriguez, 1990).

Although nonfatal injury is far more prevalent than fatalities, homicide rates are peaking at progressively earlier ages. Homicide is the second leading cause of injury-related death among all American adolescents (Christoffel, 1990).

Research on youth violence shows far greater risk for African American youth, both male and female, living in inner city areas than for any other racial/ethnic group. Sample findings from the National Center for Health Statistics (1990) include:

- Homicide is the leading cause of death for both male and female African Americans between the ages of 15-34.

- African American males between 15-19 are homicide victims at an annual rate of 50.7 per 100,000, compared to a rate of 8.5 for their white male counterparts; comparable figures for 10-14 year olds indicate a rate of 4.6 for African American males and 1.2 for white males.

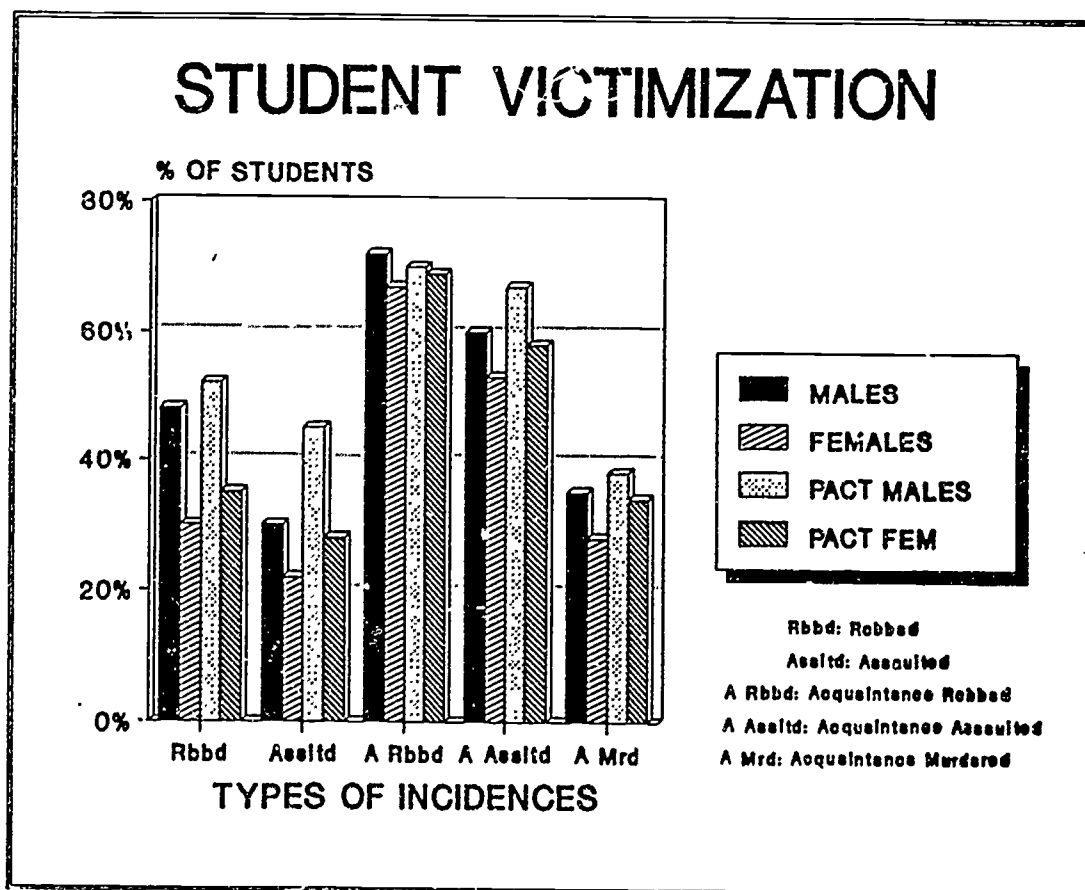
- African American females between 10-19 are four times more likely to be homicide victims than white females of the same age.

- In Dayton, Ohio, during 1988 and 1989, African American male youth accounted for 100% of all murder arrests for youth under 18 (City of Dayton crime statistics, 1990).

As part of the PACT project, a survey was conducted to determine the levels of violence to which students at the participating middle school had been exposed. The total number of respondents to the survey was 409 (81% of the total school population). Gender of the respondents was 55.7% male; 44.3 % female. Approximately 62% of the students surveyed were African American. This survey indicated that overall exposure to violence has impacted more than half of the student population. Of the total population, 54% (221 students) reported at least one incident of violence, either personal victimization or victimization of an acquaintance. Eighty respondents (19.5%) indicated knowing someone who was murdered.

Separate analysis was conducted of the PACT participants to compare their exposure to violence to that of the total school population. This analysis determined that PACT participants, who were 93% African American, had experienced greater levels of exposure to violence and personal victimization than the general school population, as shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1



Adolescents frequently lack the interpersonal skills which would help them resolve potentially violent situations peacefully. In a recent survey of 7th graders from an inner city school with a predominantly minority population, most surveyed adolescents reported that, when faced with conflict, they did not even consider any alternatives to fighting nor could they describe any constructive ways to handle anger with a peer (Landers, 1989).

Few school-based approaches to violence prevention exist, and existing programs suffer from limitations which would predict less effectiveness with this target population. Virtually all general affective skill building programs have been developed for mainstream populations with no particular attempt to address the specific needs of central city African American youth (Rhodes & Jason, 1988). In addition, most such programs are extremely time-limited. While they may raise awareness of issues of violence, they generally do not allow sufficient time for practice and rehearsal so that target skills and behavior can become automatic, consistent responses.

PACT Approach

PACT aids participants in learning how to resist acting aggressively and how to communicate and negotiate with aggressive peers in a way that would reduce their chances of being drawn into a fight or being attacked. The target social skills for training are:

- (1) Giving positive feedback: thanking or complimenting others.
- (2) Giving negative feedback: expressing criticism or disappointment appropriately.
- (3) Accepting negative feedback: listening, understanding, and reacting to criticism appropriately.
- (4) Resisting peer pressure: saying no, giving personal reasons, and suggesting alternative activities.
- (5) Problem-solving: identifying problems, considering consequences, and determining possible solutions.
- (6) Negotiation: resolving conflicts with others, suggesting solutions, asking for alternatives, and learning to compromise.

The training program is structured into small group format. An ideal group size is 7-10 students. Groups are team led by graduate clinical psychology students. The experience serves as a formal practicum site for the doctoral level students who are supervised by a licensed clinical psychologist. Students are introduced to a target skill through observation of videotaped vignettes which illustrate desired behaviors. Each skill is broken down into step-by-step components which students practice through videotaped role plays and psychodramas. They then watch themselves and classmates modeling correct behavior for additional reinforcement.

Efforts were made to avoid any perception of stigma associated with participation in PACT. The acronym chosen makes no reference to problem behavior of any type. When schoolwide announcements were made regarding the project, it was referred to as the "PACT Club." An incentive system was developed to reward active participation and appropriate behavior in training sessions (e.g., being on time; following directions). Students were given "success dollars"--paper money which could be exchanged in the principal's office for T-shirts, gift certificates, pens, paper, cosmetics, and items of similar appeal to adolescents. Students actively participated in the selection of other incentive activities such as pizza parties and visits to a local amusement park. Training was completed within one semester, but additional time was needed to conduct warm-up/rapport-building activities; to introduce youth and their teachers to project staff and to the project concept and procedures; to secure parental permission; to gather initial data on skill levels in the target intervention areas; and to allow make-up time for missed training sessions.

Results

A total of 37 students were referred to the program, and 30 students were accepted as group participants. Two students did not get started; one never showed up and one withdrew from school after one session so that 28 students actually began training. Of these:

15 students (53%) completed the full training cycle.

7 students (25%) transferred out of Roth. Of the transfers, 3 students were with PACT for 12 or more sessions and had regular attendance until the time of transfer. The other 4 students attended 7 or fewer sessions before transferring.

6 students (21%) were lost to attrition. Two patterns were exhibited. A few students appeared to never get "engaged" initially; three students attended 3-5 times at the beginning and never returned. The other patterns was sporadic attendance throughout the program but a failure to complete the training. Two attended 12-14 sessions, and one student entered a special program which only permitted his attending one session a week; he attended routinely on this basis until being placed on out of school suspension, then dropped out.

Attendance Records of Students Completing

Of the 15 students completing:

- 2 students had 100% attendance.
- 4 students attended between 92-97% of the training sessions.
- 3 students attended between 82-89% of the training sessions.
- 1 student had better than 70% attendance.
- 3 students attended between 63-65% of the training sessions.
- 2 students attended between 50-58% of the training sessions.

The average PACT attendance was 80.4%. Of the six students with lower attendance, 3 had academic progress problems which necessitated their staying in class rather than attending PACT sessions. (Participation in PACT requires missing some classwork).

Trainer and Teacher Observation of Change in Target Skills

African American youth who completed training demonstrated improvement in the target skills of giving and accepting positive and negative feedback, negotiation, and problem-solving as measured by pre-to-post observation of behavior by youth trainers. The average individual student gain across all social skill areas was rated as 27.4%. See Figure 2.

In addition, students experienced the greatest gains in the areas in which they initially showed the greatest deficits and, conversely, the lowest gains in areas where they had demonstrated greater entry level skills. See Figure 3.

FIGURE 2

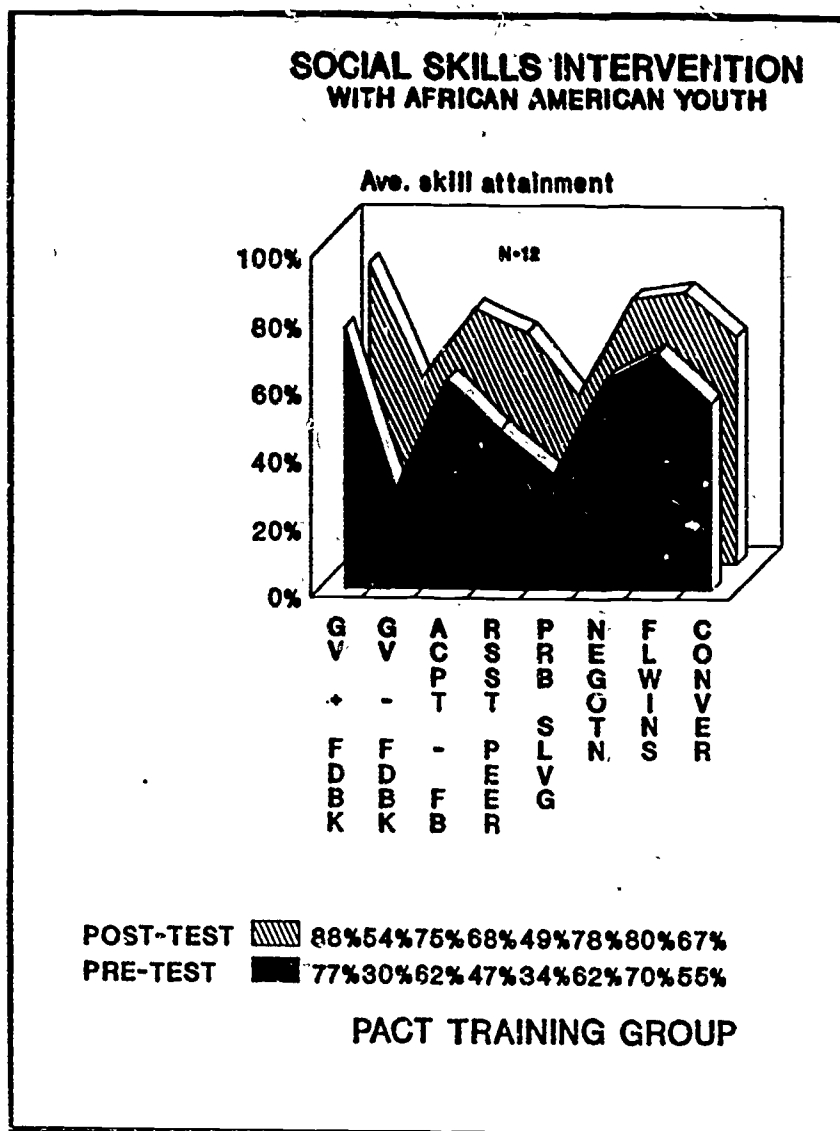


FIGURE 3

**Entry Level Social Skill Profiles Compared to Areas of
Gain Among African American Youth Who Completed
PACT Training**

Ave. Pretest %	Areas of Skill Deficit X Rank (Lowest to Highest)	Areas of Skill Gain X Rank (Highest to Lowest)	% Increase
29.6%	Giving Negative Feedback	Giving Negative Feedback	82%
33.9%	Problem Solving	Problem Solving	45.7%
47.4%	Resisting Peer Pressure	Resisting Peer Pressure	44.1%
55%	Conversation	Negotiation	20.8%
61.6%	Negotiation	Accepting Negative Feedback	21.6%
61.7%	Accepting Negative Feedback	Conversation	21.2%
70.3%	Following Instructions	Giving Positive Feedback	14.3%
76.8%	Giving Positive Feedback	Following Instructions	13%

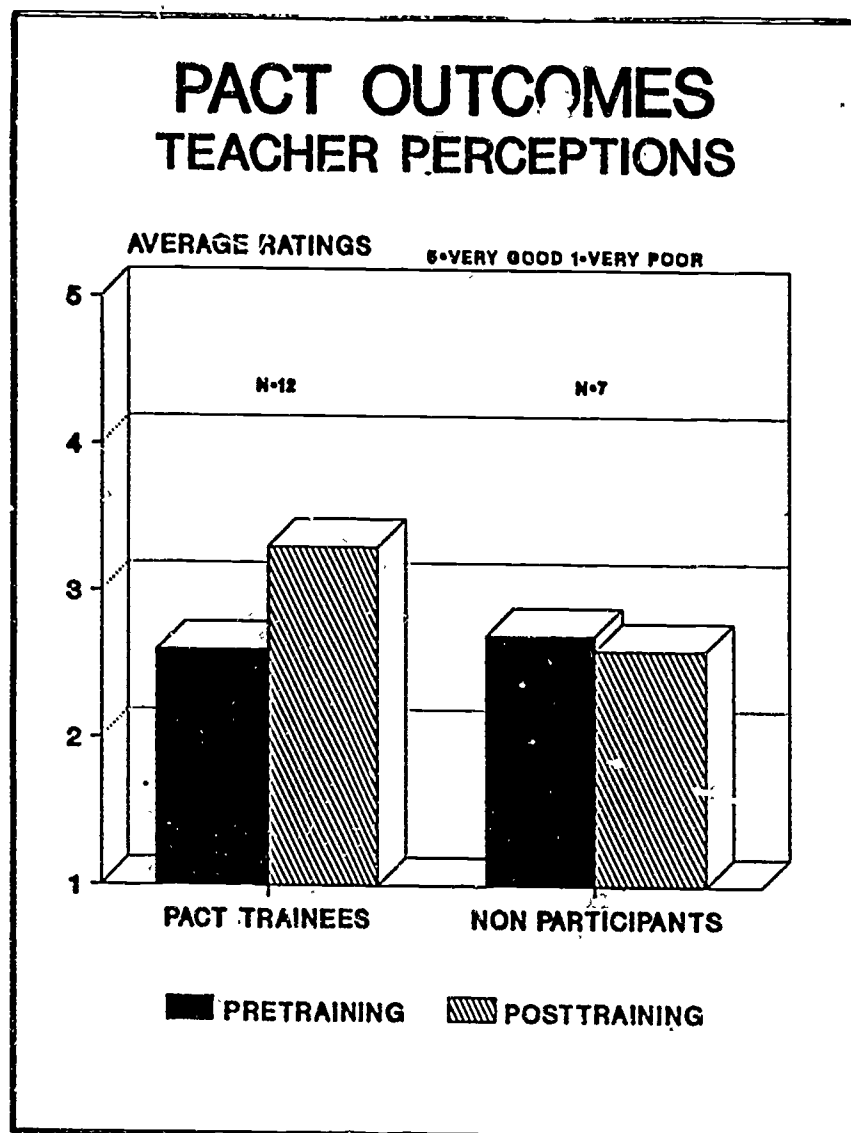
Trained youth also demonstrated growth in all target skill areas as measured by pre-to-post teacher observations. Trainer and teacher ratings were closely matched in average pre-training skill ratings of participants and average perceived skill gain. In rankings of students from most skilled to least skilled, pre-training, teachers and youth trainers were in exact agreement on four positions and varied only by one ranking on two other positions.

Comparison of Teacher and Youth Trainer Perceptions of PACT Students

	<u>Teachers</u>	<u>Youth Trainers</u>
Average pre-training skill rating	58.9%	53.9%
Average skill gain	27.4%	30.4%

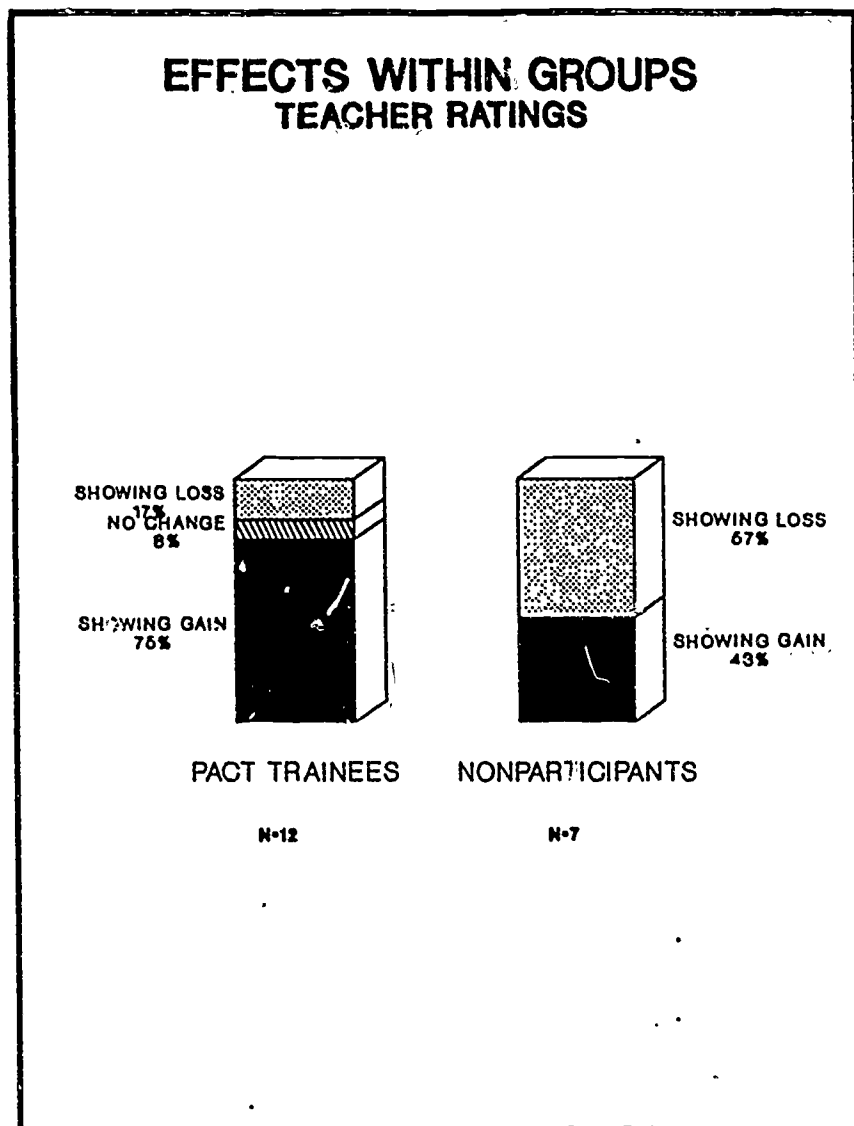
Teachers also perceived greater gains in targeted skills for PACT-trained youth than for untrained youth. They rated the average individual skill gain in PACT trainees as 30.4% in comparison to a skill loss of 1.1% in a comparison group of 7 untrained students during the same time period. Figures 4 illustrates the differences in teacher perceptions of trained vs. untrained youth.

FIGURE 4



Teachers also perceived that greater numbers of PACT-trained youth showed gain than did untrained adolescents. The differences in their perceptions between these groups is shown in Figure 5.

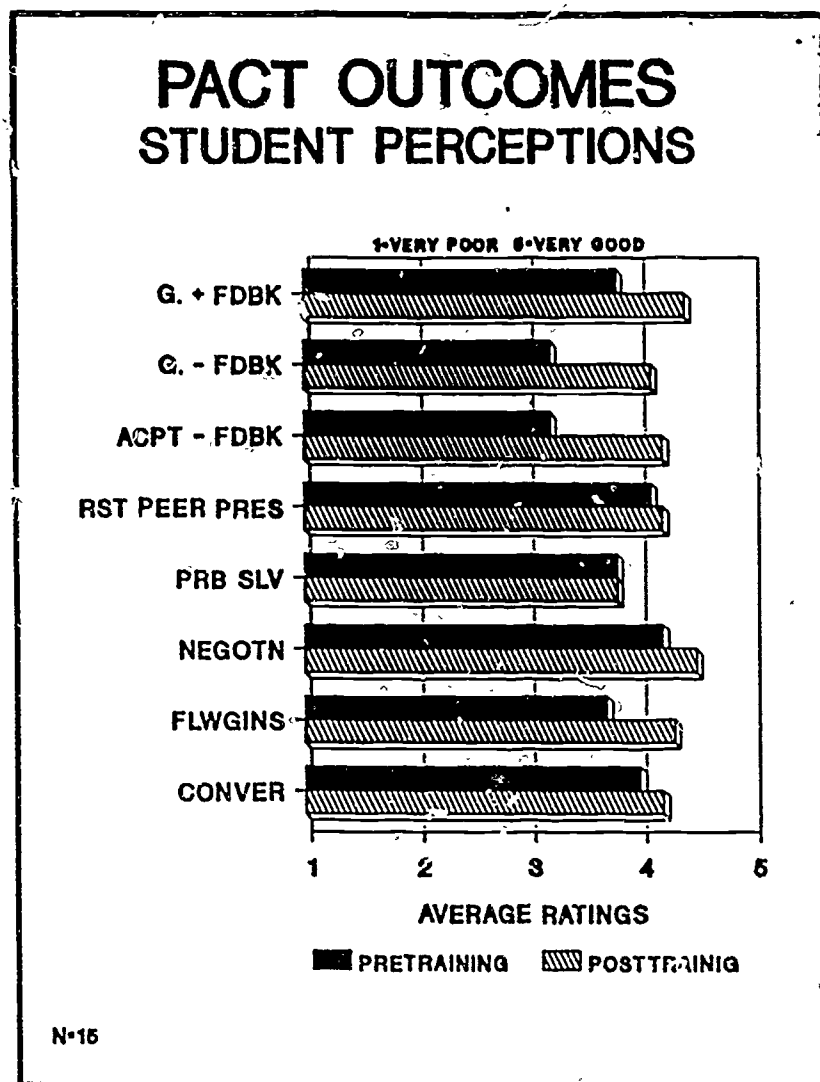
FIGURE 5



Student Self-Ratings

In addition, students did a pre-to-post self-rating of skill change. Although clearly a more subjective measure, it is certainly a desirable outcome to have students feel confident that they are able to perform the skills they have learned. Students rated themselves as having gained in all areas except problem-solving where they saw no change, with their greatest self-perceived gain being in the areas of giving and accepting negative feedback. These were coincidentally high areas of skill gain as seen by teachers and trainers. See Figure 6 on the following page.

FIGURE 6



Anecdotal Reports

In the Roth project, youth trainers observed a training situation in which the participants had difficulty in demonstrating inappropriate behavior. In one role-playing exercise between pairs of students, one student was supposed to behave aggressively so that the other student could respond correctly by negotiation, giving negative feedback, or other appropriate skill. Some students had great difficulty in maintaining the inappropriate behavior and instead automatically reverted back to the correct behavioral steps.

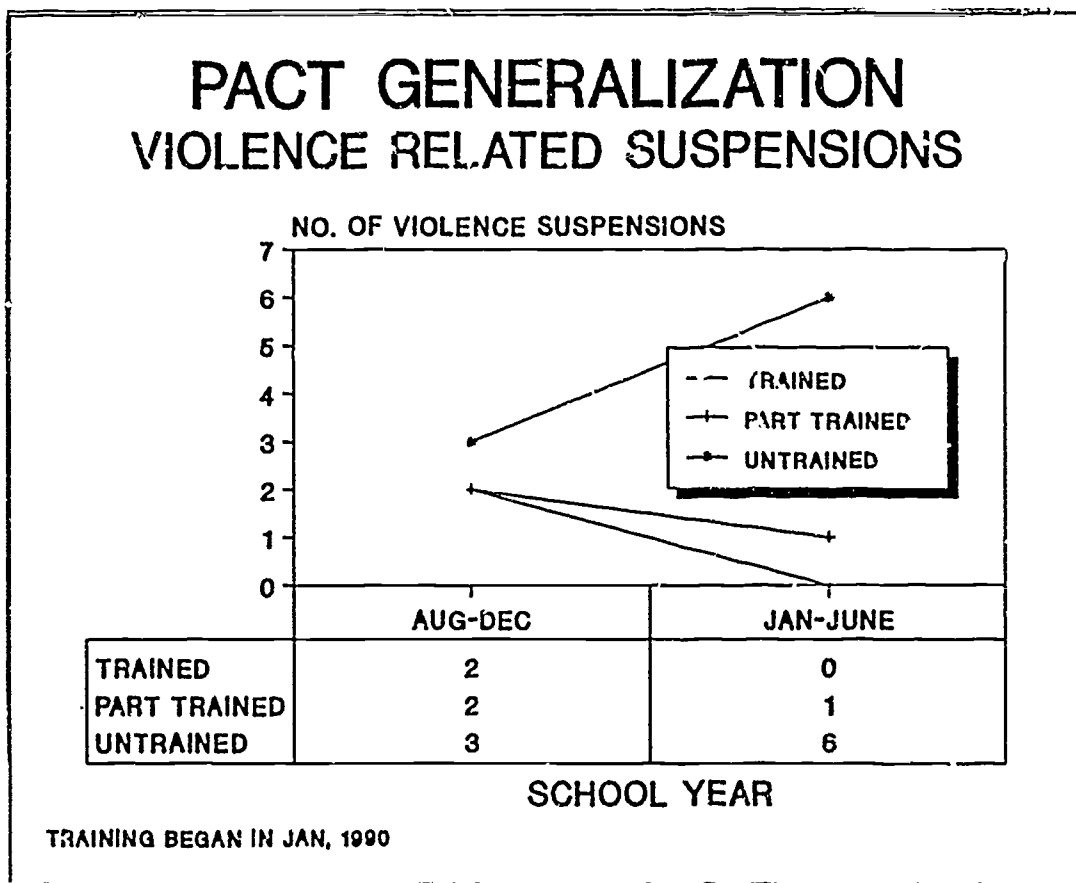
One student started an anti-violence rap group.

Both in the pilot and in the Roth project, students appeared to appreciate having the opportunity to process events or issues that bothered them. Trainers needed to allow the curriculum to be flexible enough to permit this needed discussion on occasion. For example, there was an incident of murder of a classmate that many participants knew. In the Roth project, one training session departed from the set curriculum into a lively discussion of racial labels. The small group format appeared to facilitate a general support group function for PACT participants.

Behavioral Outcomes

Behavioral measures also demonstrated less involvement in violence-related behavior in school in trained youth vs. untrained youth. Tracking of in and out of school suspensions and expulsions showed evidence that the social skill training reduced aggressive and violent behavior in students who completed the full program. None of the 15 participants completing training had out of school suspensions or expulsions nor were there incidents of in-school suspension related to violence. In a comparison group of 13 untrained students, there were 2 expulsions, 1 violence-related out of school suspension, and 6 in-school suspensions related to violence. Partial completers with significant participation in PACT training (12-18 sessions out of 37 or 38 possible sessions) showed reduction in violence-related behavior as well.

FIGURE 7



Discussion

It is important to keep in mind that PACT is designed as a primary prevention/early intervention program which has a dual purpose of reducing the risk for both victimization by, and perpetration of, violence. It is not intended as a secondary level intervention with youth demonstrating extreme levels of aggression and there appeared to be some self-selection of highly

aggressive youth out of the program. Among students completing the training, 13% had histories of pre-PACT incidents of aggression resulting in in-school suspension, compared to 33% of students who dropped out. The dropouts in addition had higher general levels of problem behavior. All six dropouts had previous histories of in-school suspension for some problem whereas only three of the PACT completers had similar reports.

This should not be interpreted as meaning that the approach is only effective with "model" adolescents at low risk for problems with violence. The demographic characteristics (age, race, and urban residence) of the trainee group without question places them in a high risk group. In addition, they had previously been selected out of the general student population for placement in a special cluster classroom because of school personnel perceptions of behavior, adjustment, academic, attitude, or skill factors which made them vulnerable to problems with transition to middle school. They were further sub-selected from this pool for participation in PACT as being the group most in need of a social skills/violence prevention intervention. In entry level social skills teachers ranked PACT participants on the average in the poor-to-fair range, with PACT completers in fact initially scoring lower by teacher rating than PACT dropouts. It is assumed that in making these ratings teachers compared the students with the general adolescent population. Finally, the Roth survey provides clear evidence of the greater risk for personal victimization of PACT students. Both PACT males and females reported greater incidence of being robbed or assaulted. PACT males were at especially high risk for becoming assault victims; their rate of victimization by assault was almost double that of the average male student in the school.

The outcomes of this pilot project appear very encouraging. Preliminary findings by both teachers and trainers suggest that social skills training improves youth skills in communication, problem-solving, and negotiation. These skills are assumed to relate to the ability to avoid violence and outcomes related to school behavior appear to validate this assumption. The results must be interpreted with caution as the size of the trained African American youth population is very small. Moreover, PACT is not designed as a research project and there are obvious limitations to the outcomes that been investigated. Ideally, there would be longitudinal follow-up with PACT participants to see if these skill improvements are maintained over time. Also, measures to capture out-of-school behavior related to violence (both at home and in the community) would be highly desirable on both a short-term and long-term basis. A more scientific validation of results would further require a matched control group as well. At present, funding constraints limit the project's ability to pursue this level of study.

Programmatically, the project will continue to evolve as the curriculum and training methods are refined. Staff recognize the need to continue to explore additional alternative components such as anger management, moral reasoning, the development of racial pride, and the inclusion of companion training for parents. The addition of short-term interventions in aggression replacement training would seem to be especially beneficial for youth who are acting out.

In terms of the process and setting, the project has been characterized by excellent cooperation between school and project personnel at all levels of the system and this has been essential to managing the logistical issues of "importing" a nonacademic program to an academic setting. In addition, project staff have worked in close cooperation with staff of Community Connections, making use of this case management service resource for referrals of project youth to other needed services. Some practical problems related to the setting have been encountered and resolved while others remain. For example, one that can be addressed in the upcoming year is the relatively high attrition rate due to student transfers out of the school. Project staff simply did not anticipate the highly transient housing patterns of the target population and allow for the loss of one-fourth of the starting pool for this reason. In the 1990-91 project year, staff will counter this by beginning with larger numbers of students. In addition, discounting transfers (whose retention outcomes are unknown), the project had a 28.5% attrition rate from dropout. While not unduly high, it is obviously more desirable to operate at a fuller service capacity level. As PACT is a lengthy intervention which sequentially builds from introductory skills, new students cannot easily enter the program once training is underway. In the new project year, the addition of a third youth

trainer will assist in more extended personal outreach to students who remain in school but stop attending training sessions.

A more difficult problem is the need for students to miss class in order to attend PACT training. This has been problematic for students with academic difficulties and has been approached on a case-by-case basis working with the teacher to ensure no academic loss. Because of the structure of the school day, there does not appear to be a good solution to this problem. On the other hand, the benefits to operation of the project at a school site are of such significance that they override such difficulties. These include:

- Elimination of the need for special transportation, facilities, and extended participant recruitment.

- Additional opportunities for reinforcement of target social skills by teachers and other school personnel outside of the training setting.

- Improvement in the chances for good attendance by integration into the school day.

- Easy tracking of related behavior outside of classroom training.

- Addressing a significant problem/risk now present in the school.

- Sensitization of school personnel to the affective needs of students and the benefits of nonacademic interventions.

- Development of better community/school relations.

Conclusions

In summary, the PACT project appears to be a viable and effective approach to reduce the potential for violence in African American middle school youth. Certainly project staff recognize that the approach is not a finalized "one best way." The curriculum, program procedures, and training methods will benefit from continued refinement and additional research. Too, the realities of intruding into a school setting need to be constantly recognized and addressed so that the solid foundation of good will and cooperation between university and school can be maintained. The critical risks for African American youth of injury or death from violence, the current lack of solutions, and the apparent success of the pilot are compelling arguments for continued cooperative efforts.

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